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Source: *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (May, 1976), pp. 405-419
Published by: Duke University Press
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/2053272
Accessed: 26-10-2025 01:39 UTC

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The Politics of Plunder: The Cholas in Eleventh-Century Ceylon

GEORGE W. SPENCER

> You delight in looting the enemy's country by the light of the destructive fires which you have started. Because of your plunder, the enemy's land is deprived of all good things.
>
> poet's praise of Karikāla Chola

ALTHOUGH political and cultural developments in India have strongly influenced those in Ceylon for many centuries, the effects were often contradictory and ironic. The land that sent the Buddhist religion to Ceylon also sent invaders to plunder its Buddhist monuments; and the Indian mercenaries recruited by the kings of Ceylon to strengthen the royal army were such a turbulent element that they themselves frequently posed the greatest threat to the stability of the realm. India's cultural contributions to Ceylon are well known, and have been examined in detail by Indian, Ceylonese, and Western scholars. The purpose of this paper is to examine the more abrasive side of the Indian–Ceylonese relationship during the eleventh century, when the imperial Chola kings of southern India sent invading armies into Ceylon, bent upon occupation and plunder.[1] A more general aim of this analysis is to suggest that organized plundering activity was a more important politico-economic instrument in the traditional Indian state than most historians have hitherto acknowledged.

The Chola presence in Ceylon has been discussed by previous scholars largely as a problem in administrative history. Those authors have generally assumed that, during their occupation of northern Ceylon, the Cholas "administered" that region in a manner resembling their regime in India, and that what should be analyzed is the framework of that regime—particularly through identification of administrative officers, analysis of titles they bore, and speculation upon the nature of the departments they are assumed to have controlled.[2] The alternative argument pursued here is that Chola "administration"—particularly on the fringes of the empire—was minimal, and that the logic of Chola predatory expansion gave priority to the quick-return profits of plunder over the long-term but problematic profits of territorial conquest and consolidation.

The most spectacular Chola military campaigns in southern and eastern India during the late tenth and early eleventh centuries were in fact plundering raids. Chola expeditions into Ceylon and the Straits of Malacca—the attack upon Śrīvijaya—in the same period must be viewed against this background of sustained plundering activity in India.

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[1] I have taken the liberty of retaining the older name for Sri Lanka because "Ceylon" is well established in the literature referred to in this study. I have also used the common Anglicized spelling "Chola" in preference to Cōḷa.

[2] See especially W. M. K. Wijetunga, "Some Aspects of Cola Administration of Ceylon in the Eleventh Century," *University of Ceylon Review*, XXIII, 1–2 (1965), pp. 67–81.

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Historians have been tardy in recognizing the implications of this pattern, partly because we have been misled by the language of territorial conquest in which the inscriptional claims about these raids were conventionally expressed. The historian can readily penetrate the rhetorical haze only when there is a contrasting, contemporary record from the territory that was attacked.[3] One reason for selecting the Ceylon incursions as a case study in Chola military expansion is that in this instance we have abundant commentaries on Chola activities, from the *Cūlavaṃsa,* to offset the panegyrics of the Chola poets. Moreover, the Chronicle is more frank in its discussion of the suffering endured by the Sinhalese (perhaps a reflection of the Theravāda Buddhist world-view) than are the relevant Indian sources, which primarily dwell upon royal glories achieved.

Chola Warfare as an Economic Activity

A fundamental premise of the following discussion is that Chola kings utilized long-range plundering raids as the principal tactic in a dual strategy of (1) sustaining and enlarging the supply of "free-flowing" resources to the royal court, and (2) providing an occasion for royal coordination and direction of a common enterprise among the diverse elements of a markedly decentralized socio-political system, i.e., as an integrative activity.[4] The resource-gathering model from which this premise derives is a zonal model in which regions at a distance from the state's heartland are subject to less regularized—but also more violent—exactions. Regularized levies imposed in the heartland include both "taxation" (which may be characterized as a highly rationalized exaction based upon enumeration of lands, produce, goods, or population) and "tribute" (indirect, negotiable exaction imposed upon chiefs or other intermediaries, varying according to the relative military strengths of the parties involved). For the sake of convenience, and to avoid a detailed and problematic discussion of the Chola revenue system, I shall merge these two regularized levies—taxation and tribute—in order to distinguish both from "plunder," with which I am primarily concerned here. Strictly speaking, however, we should envisage a taxation-plunder continuum, in which *taxation* serves as the form of exaction imposed in areas where the dynastic power is strongest, *tribute* as the form imposed on more peripheral/powerful chiefs, and *plunder* as the irregular exaction taken from the most distant places which were ordinarily subject to rival dynastic centers. The conventional view seems to be that taxation was the most important, and plunder the least important (if not aberrant) source of income for the Indian state. The present analysis proceeds upon the assumption that we can understand the dynamics of the Chola politico-military system—and, by extension, that of many other Indian and non-Indian dynastic states—only if we reverse these priorities.

Since dynastic states were subject to reciprocal plunder, a state's tax-yielding territories had to be protected from disruptive, "enemy" intrusions. But the amorphous structure of the state, and its lack of clearly defined borders, made such defensive functions very difficult for the court to perform. The Chola kings were hard pressed to provide effective protection to a vaguely defined realm consisting of many scattered pockets of settled agriculture, separated by zones of uncleared forest. This problem was

[3] E.g., in contrast to the glowing Chola references to the Deccan campaigns of Rājarāja I, the Hoṭṭur inscription (A.D. 1007–08) of the Cāḷukya king Satyāsraya describes the Chola army as "ravaging the whole country, perpetrating murders of women, children, and Brāhmaṇs, seizing women, . . . overthrowing the order of caste," etc. *Epigraphia Indica,* XVI (1921–22), No. 11.

[4] The concept of free-flowing resources has been developed by S. N. Eisenstadt in *The Political Systems of Empires* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1963).

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compounded by the fact that the most common threat to local security was not from large-scale warfare, but from sporadic livestock raids—particularly those launched by the unassimilated or semi-assimilated tribal peoples who inhabited the forest tracts. Day-to-day protection was therefore provided, not by any centralized police or military authority, but by local chiefs and peasant communities themselves, especially when they were situated far from the Chola court. In these and other ways, local settlements were highly self-reliant (which is *not* to say fully autonomous)—as well organized to resist the revenue demands of the king as to thwart the attacks of cattle raiders, though not wholly immune to either.[5]

Kings faced a dilemma in this regard, for royal assistance in forest-clearance and colonization schemes was intended to increase the state's internal tax-base; but the proliferation of distant settlements also encouraged the rise of local chiefs and various corporate bodies that could challenge the pretensions of central authority. The vigorous support Chola kings gave to the organizing of Brahman-dominated village clusters, the well-known *brahmadēya* settlements, may have been designed in part to provide a non-martial alternative to the growth of local warrior power and hence also to the excessive proliferation of intermediary chiefs who could challenge the claims of the court. Yet during the reigns of even the most capable Chola rulers, the outlying portions of the empire were under the de facto control of such local chiefs, whose tributary relationship to the Cholas was nominal, and whose emulation of the imperial life-style was no doubt based in large part upon a desire to participate in imperial warfare and its profits.

Since chiefs, villages, and other local bodies could utilize a variety of instruments and strategies in order to retain their resources, it is scarcely surprising that kings should have turned to compensatory, long-range plundering raids into "enemy" (i.e., rival dynastic) territories in order to secure a supplementary flow of booty in the form of livestock, jewels, and other kinds of portable wealth. Some plundered goods were subsequently donated by kings, queens, court officials, or generals as endowments to temples, which in turn commonly distributed money and livestock to local individuals or village assemblies in order to establish perpetual services to the temple.[6] Court Brahmans assisted these rapacious activities with ritual and rhetorical embellishment, for which there was ample precedent dating back to early Vedic times.[7] Aggressive warfare in distant territories thus forestalled enemy plunder of local resources while simultaneously enabling kings, and those who emulated them, to play their socially approved roles as protectors and philanthropists.

Ceylon and South Indian Politics

Even before the emergence of the imperial Cholas in the middle of the ninth century, the kings of Ceylon and those of southern India had been drawn into one another's political affairs. During the first half of the century, the kings of Ceylon had maintained a loose alliance with the Pallava kings against the nearer and more threatening Pāṇḍyas. There was apparently some Indian colonization of northern Ceylon during the Pallava

[5] For related observations on center–hinterland relations in this period, see George W. Spencer and Kenneth R. Hall, "Toward an Analysis of Dynastic Hinterlands: The Imperial Cholas of Eleventh Century South India," *Asian Profile*, II, 1 (1974), pp. 51–62.

[6] See my "Temple Money-Lending and Livestock Redistribution in Early Tanjore," *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, V, 3 (1968), pp. 277–93.

[7] The Rigvedic account of the *aśvamedha* lists cows and horses among the legitimate objects to be seized. *RV*, I, 162.22.

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period as well, for the Ceylon Chronicle refers to Tamil settlers in the early ninth century, and suggests that in time of crisis they would become a kind of fifth column, ready to join the Pāṇḍyan invaders against the Sinhalese.[8] Just such a crisis developed during the reign of King Sena I (ca. 833–851), when the Pāṇḍyan forces of Śrī Māra Śrīvallabha landed in Ceylon. Local Tamils joined the invaders to capture the capital, Anurādhapura, with results described in the Chronicle:

> The Pandu King took away all valuables in the treasure house of the King and plundered what there was to plunder in vihāra and town. In the Ratnapāsāda the golden image of the Master [Buddha], the two jewels which had been set as eyes in the stone [image of the] Prince of Sages, likewise the gold plates on the cetiya in the Thūpārāma, and the golden images here and there in the vihāras—all these he took and deprived the Island of Laṅkā of her valuables, leaving the splendid town in a state as if it had been plundered by yakkhas.[9]

But the next king of Ceylon, Sena II (851–855), countered by invading the mainland and capturing the Pāṇḍyan capital at Madurai, with Pallava assistance, and deposing the Pāṇḍyan king in favor of his rebel son. The army captured much treasure, including some items that had previously been taken from Ceylon.[10] Thus, well before the Chola invasions of the tenth and eleventh centuries, the kings of Ceylon had already become entangled in the dynastic politics and military conflicts of southern India, as both plunderers and plundered. Ceylonese policy toward the mainland continued to vacillate between fear of Indian neighbors when the latter were aggressive, and the temptation to intervene in continental affairs when Indian states were disorganized.

The rise of the imperial Cholas produced a diplomatic revolution in Ceylon's relations with the continent by drastically rearranging the configurations of dynastic power in southern India. As the emerging Chola regime displaced that of the Pallavas and began to press southward from the Kāvēri delta into the Pāṇḍyan domain, the kings of Ceylon, now deprived of the Pallava alliance, began to view the Cholas as a greater threat than the Pāṇḍyas. The Pāṇḍyas would now require assistance just to sustain their position as rulers of a weakened buffer-state, for there were riches in the far south to attract Chola attention. The Pāṇḍyas had access to the pearl-fisheries of the Gulf of Manar, while Ceylon had been renowned from early historic times as a source of precious stones; both were attractive objects for Chola appropriation.[11] In the face of the Chola threat, Ceylonese–Pāṇḍyan enmity gave way to cooperation; in 915, troops from Ceylon went to the aid of the Pāṇḍyan king Rājasiṃha II, only to share his disastrous defeat at the hands of the Chola king Parāntaka I (907–955).[12] Unable to recoup his losses, Rājasiṃha finally fled to Ceylon with his imperial regalia some time during the reign of Dappula IV (923–934) and sought refuge at the Ceylonese court. But Rājasiṃha apparently became a victim of the factional politics at the Anurādhapura court, because he abruptly left for Kerala, leaving his regalia behind.[13]

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[8] *Cūlavaṃsa* [hereafter *Cv.*] 50.15. Presumably some of these Tamils were immigrant mercenaries or the descendants of earlier mercenaries who had become involved in Ceylonese politics during the preceding two centuries, but the Chronicle does not enlighten us on this point.

[9] *Cv.* 50.33–36. The Chronicle frequently likens the Damiḷas to devils.

[10] *Cv.* 51.27–51. The Ceylonese troops, upon capturing Madurai, are said to have "plundered it completely."

[11] Many years later, in the late eleventh century, the Chola king Kulōttuṅga I would be described in his eulogy as "pleased to seize the pearl fisheries of the Madurai country." *South Indian Inscriptions*, II, Part II (1892), No. 58. On Ceylon, see A. Appadorai, *Economic Conditions in Southern India (1000–1500 A.D.)* (Madras: Univ. of Madras, 1936), p. 459.

[12] The Chronicle suggests further decimation of the Ceylonese troops during this campaign, due to plague. *Cv.* 52.77–81

[13] *Cv.* 53.8–10

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Yet the humiliation of Rājasiṃha did not mean total victory for the Cholas; indeed, the incompleteness of their conquest of the Pāṇḍyan domain impelled them to undertake further adventures in northern Ceylon. According to the Chronicle, Parāntaka eventually sought to have himself crowned in Madurai in order to confirm his conquest of Pāṇḍyamaṇḍalam, but was unable to do so in the proper fashion because of the absence of the Pāṇḍyan regalia. When the Ceylonese king, Udaya IV (940–953), refused to surrender them, Parāntaka used this refusal as a pretext for launching a new invasion of Ceylon, defeating Udaya's forces, and pillaging the countryside. But Udaya retreated southward with the Pāṇḍyan regalia into the wilds of Rohaṇa; and the frustrated Chola forces had to depart without them. Although the Chola troops made off with other booty, the Chronicle claims that this plunder was subsequently recovered by a counter-expedition against the mainland.[14]

The problem of the regalia was merely symptomatic of a larger pacification problem encountered by the Cholas in the Pāṇḍyan country. This territory was an awkward transition zone, close enough to the Kāvēri delta to invite true territorial conquest but sufficiently distant to frustrate effective consolidation, given the rudimentary administrative apparatus at the command of the Chola court. The pacification problem was also aggravated by the less advanced state of peasant colonization in the far south. This reflected the persistence of extensive forest tracts which could provide refuge to hostile chiefs and warriors, therefore constituting a serious problem of control: The Cholas never subdued the Pāṇḍyan domain as fully as they had the Pallava kingdom. They were forced to constantly maintain garrisons in the south, often under the command of Chola princes. The proximity of northern Ceylon as a refuge for defeated enemies and as a base for potential attack upon the mainland added to the insecurity of the Chola empire's southern frontier, and this predicament must have provided further impetus to Chola invasion plans. However, this problem ultimately proved to be insoluble, for it was open-ended: The Cholas would face a challenge similar to that provided by the Pāṇḍyan domain when they attempted to occupy northern Ceylon and then had to contend with continued turbulence in the southern part of the island.

Up to the mid-tenth century, south Indian military expeditions to Ceylon had been brief ad hoc affairs—designed to facilitate short-term gains with minimal involvement, and followed by withdrawal to the mainland. But in the reigns of the most ambitious and aggressive of the imperial Chola kings, viz. Rājarāja I (985–1014) and his son Rājēndra I (1012–1044), a new strategy emerged—based upon more ruthless plunder and destruction of major political and religious centers in northern Ceylon, followed by the establishment of semi-permanent, fortified encampments from which wide-ranging raids could be carried out in other parts of the island. The period of Chola entrenchment in northern Ceylon lasted about three-quarters of a century, from roughly 993 (the date of Rājarāja's first invasion)[15] to 1070, when Vijayabāhu I recaptured the north and expelled the Chola forces.

As so often happened in Indian dynastic states, internal problems at the Anurādhapura court encouraged Rājarāja's invasion. The king, Mahinda V (c. 981–1017), was distracted by a revolt of his own Indian mercenary troops (these forces were difficult to control even in the best of times). Kings of Ceylon had gradually come to rely heavily

[14] *Cv.* 53.47ff.

[15] 993 corresponds to the earliest date of inscriptions that include Īḷamaṇḍalam (Ceylon) among Rājarāja's conquests. Although the *Cūlavaṃsa* comments upon this period in detail, it does not refer to Rājarāja by name, so it is difficult to disentangle the events of his reign from later developments, except by synchronism with Chola inscriptions. Further evidence relating to Rājarāja's invasion is noted below.

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upon these mercenaries, rather than upon indigenous Sinhalese troops, who apparently were not sufficiently aggressive.[16] The Indian mercenaries were referred to, according to their region of origin in southern India, as Damiḷas, Kēraḷas, or Karnāṭas. The troops from Malabar seem to have been a particularly turbulent element within the army. Nevertheless, civil wars and factional struggles in Ceylon had gradually increased royal dependence upon Indian mercenaries. Back in the seventh century, an unfortunate precedent had been established: Defeated Sinhalese leaders would flee to India and return with Indian troops to resume the fight, thus injecting more and more of these opportunistic forces into Ceylon's political affairs.[17] King Aggabodhi III, dethroned by the rebel Jeṭṭhatissa, even managed to regain his throne with the assistance of Tamil mercenaries.[18]

Increasing reliance upon mercenaries naturally aggravated the problem of providing sufficient pay or plunder to sustain the army. Although the kings of Ceylon claimed sovereignty over the entire island, their region of effective control was confined to the northern heartland, known as Rājaraṭṭha or King's Domain, a lowland dry-zone where the populace was sustained by an intricate system of tank irrigation. Only a tentative and vacillating suzerainty was exercised over the less-developed southern and west-central regions, known respectively as Rohaṇa and Dakkhiṇa-desa, the latter conventionally regarded as the domain of the heir-apparent.[19] The lack of prosperous "enemy" territories to plunder in other parts of Ceylon, plus the obvious logistical difficulties associated with carrying on campaigns in India, no doubt rendered the problem of controlling the military forces particularly acute. In times of internal crisis—and there was seldom a dearth of rival claimants to the throne—Anurādhapura itself could be threatened by unruly mercenaries. The civil war fought between Aggabodhi III and Dāṭhopatissa I, a conflict in which mercenaries played a leading role, had resulted in the plunder of royal and monastic treasures in Anurādhapura, as well as the burning of the royal palace and the Relic Temple.[20]

The army could be controlled only by a vigorous king; Mahinda V lacked the necessary skill. The Buddhist chroniclers,[21] with characteristic emphasis upon moral deficiencies, later blamed the king for the ensuing Chola invasion:

> As [Mahinda] wandered from the path of statecraft and was of very weak character, the peasants did not deliver to him his share of the produce. As the prince in his tenth year had entirely lost his fortune, he was unable to satisfy his troops by giving them their pay. All the Keraḷas who got no pay planted themselves with one another at the door of the

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[16] Wilhelm Geiger has argued that this use of Indian mercenaries was necessary because the indigenous Sinhalese warrior class had become attached to the land and as a result had lost its mobility. See Heinz Bechert (ed.), *Culture of Ceylon in Mediaeval Times* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1960), p. 30. Whatever the reason, the price that was paid was high; the mercenaries created as many problems as they solved.

[17] *Cv.* 44.71–73

[18] *Cv.* 44.105ff.

[19] The *Cūlavaṃsa* refers to Rohaṇa's "terrible wildernesses" (51.136), which account for its popularity as a refuge for defeated kings, princes, rebels, etc. The mountainous central region of the island, Malaya-desa, frequently served the same purpose. *Cv.* 51.112ff.

[20] *Cv.* 44.130 ff.

[21] The compiler of the relevant section of the Chronicle was the *bhikkhu* Dhammakitti, who lived in the late twelfth century. Since he relied upon various unidentified sources for his narrative, I have referred to "chroniclers" in order to encompass both Dhammakitti and his unknown literary informants. For a discussion of the attitudes and values reflected in the Chronicle, see L. S. Perera, "The Pali Chronicle of Ceylon," in C. H. Philips (ed.), *Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1961), pp. 29–43.

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royal palace, determined upon force, bow in hand, armed with swords and [other] weapons, [with the cry] "So long as no pay is given to us he shall not eat!" But the king duped them. Taking with him all his moveable goods he escaped by an underground passage and departed in haste to Rohaṇa.[22]

The Chronicle then observes that the Chola king, who is not named but was almost certainly Rājarāja I,[23] decided to invade Ceylon when he learned of this internal strife from a merchant. An interesting causal sequence is suggested by this account: Because the king was "weak," he lost the allegiance and hence the revenues of the villages, a problem which in turn led to a revolt of the mercenary troops and thereby created an opportunity for Chola intervention. While this explanation may be simplistic, it is not implausible. Moreover, it implies that the Sinhalese kings faced many of the same problems that beset the Cholas, particularly the fact that the inheritance of an inflated military apparatus by a weak king could lead to disaster by encouraging challenges to royal authority from both within and without.

Rājarāja's inscriptions provide no details of his invasion beyond the generalized claim of conquest. The *Cūlavamsa*, however, says that the capital at Anurādhapura was "utterly destroyed in every way by the Cōḷa army."[24] The fact that the Chronicle was compiled by *bhikkhu*s, precisely the group most adversely affected by the Chola plunder of Anurādhapura—apart from the royal court itself—explains why the Chronicle catalogues Chola outrages in such detail. Although the fact that the great monastic centers of Anurādhapura were Buddhist rather than Hindu may have eased any qualms that the Tamils might have had about plundering them, the conflict was not primarily ideological, but economic.[25] The famous "four *vihāra*s" of Anurādhapura simply happened to be conspicuously prosperous, hence institutionally vulnerable. The impressive size and complexity of these monastic centers must have made them particularly tempting as objects of plunder. Although ostensibly aloof from worldly entanglements, the Ceylonese Buddhist Sangha had proven highly successful in securing the gifts and endowments needed to sustain the Order, especially in Anurādhapura, where its possession of holy relics as symbols of sacred and secular legitimacy gave the Sangha a close and symbiotic relationship with the court. At the great *vihāra*s in the capital, hundreds of monks were supported by the resources of royally assigned villages, by other gifts of kings and nobles, and by the labor of resident "servants" (*ārāmika*), including slaves.[26] Rulers commonly assigned laborers to *vihāra*s, along with the revenues of specified villages to support them.[27] The workers had overseers, and the entire monastic complex had its superinten-

[22] *Cv.* 55.3–5

[23] This invasion is said to have taken place in the thirty-sixth year of the reign of Mahinda V, which corresponds to 1017. If true, that would place the Chola occupation of Rājaraṭṭha *after* the reign of Rājarāja I, in the time of his son Rājēndra I. But the year 1017 is an improbably late date for the invasion; Rājarāja had in fact established a strong foothold in Ceylon before that year. We know that a Śaivite temple was constructed in Polonnaruva in the time of Rājarāja (Archaeological Survey of Ceylon, *Report* for 1906, pp. 17ff.), and revenues of five villages in Ceylon were assigned to the great temple in Tanjore by that king (*South Indian Inscriptions*, III, Part III (1920), No. 92.) Hence, the number 36, like so many other numbers provided by the Chronicle, is probably a mere rhetorical device, a multiple of the magic number twelve.

[24] *Cv.* 74.1

[25] As noted below, the Chola kings, though militantly Śaivite, also patronized the Buddhist *vihāra* at Nāgapaṭṭinam. Similarly, Brahmanical advice and rites flourished at the Ceylonese court throughout the medieval period. See Geiger (n. 16 above), pp. 176–77.

[26] Many of these were debt-slaves, but Tamil war-slaves were sometimes put to work on pious projects as well. *Cv.* 44.70–73

[27] *Cv.* 46.20–22

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dents. The *vihāras* at Anurādhapura thus represented a sophisticated level of institutional complexity and resource-concentration. As Wilhelm Geiger dryly observes, "monks living in one of the wealthy vihāras were not at all in indigent circumstances."[28] Anurādhapura was thus doubly vulnerable to Chola plunder—first, as a political center, with its royal treasury; secondly, as a great monastic center, with an accumulation of religious treasures and other resources.

Not even sacred relics proved to be immune to Chola depredation. At each *vihāra* was a large *thūpa* (Skt. *stūpa*), a huge burial-mound constructed over a central relic chamber. At the Mahāvihāra, the Mahāthūpa, the greatest of these structures, was reputed to have been built in the first century B.C. by King Duṭṭhagāmaṇi. The colorful story of its construction and the enshrining of its relics comprises no less than three full chapters (29–31) of the *Mahāvaṃsa*. Not only did the Chola forces decimate the *vihāras* of Anurādhapura, they also tore apart the massive *thūpas* in a search for treasures in the relic chambers.

> The Coḷas seized the Mahesī, the jewels, the diadem that the King had inherited, the whole of the [royal] ornaments, the priceless diamond bracelet, a gift of the gods, the unbreakable sword and the relic of the torn strip of cloth. But the Ruler himself, who had fled in fear to the jungle, they captured alive, with the pretence of making a treaty. Thereupon they sent the Monarch and all the treasures which had fallen into their hands at once to the Coḷa Monarch. In the three fraternities and in all Laṅkā [breaking open] the relic chambers, [they carried away] many costly images of gold, etc., and while they violently destroyed here and there all the monasteries, like blood-sucking *yakkhas* they took all the treasures of Laṅkā for themselves.[29]

Even if we allow for the exaggeration of the chroniclers, it is clear that the Cholas devastated the city. As a result of this devastation, Anurādhapura now lost its political preeminence to Polonnaruva,[30] which had briefly served as a royal residence in earlier times and was now commandeered by the Cholas as their principal settlement in northern Ceylon.[31] This move proved to be no temporary change. When the Cholas were finally driven from the island around 1070, the kings of Ceylon continued to rule from Polonnaruva instead of returning to the former capital. Ironically, the new site provided more protection against Indian invaders from the west, as well as closer proximity to the unruly province of Rohaṇa.

In spite of the thorough plundering of Anurādhapura, the Cholas do not appear to have tried to disrupt the intricate irrigation system of Rājaraṭṭha; or at least the Chronicle—which repeatedly boasts of the construction projects of the hero-kings of Ceylon and would have had no reason to ignore Chola destruction of them—conspicuously omits this charge. On the other hand, the Cholas probably lacked the motivation to mobilize local corvée labor in order to properly maintain the major works in this system, for we know from the Chronicle that Vijayabāhu I, after the expulsion of the Cholas from Ceylon, undertook extensive repair and construction projects. But there is no reason to regard these activities as different from those massive repair projects, so often praised in the Chronicle, which other kings undertook periodically in order to stem the ravages of natural decay. Serious deterioration of the irrigation system of Rājaraṭṭha, even from natural causes, could certainly have hastened the Cholas' ultimate departure

[28] Geiger (note 16 above), p. 193.

[29] *Cv.* 55.16–22

[30] Pali: Pulatthinagara; the Cholas called it Janānāthamangalam, after one of Rājarāja's titles.

[31] See S. Paranavitana, "The Capital of Ceylon during the ninth and tenth centuries," *Ceylon Journal of Science*, II (1928–33), pp. 141–47.

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from the island; but without additional evidence beyond the fact of subsequent repairs, the historian can only mention this as a possibility. The fact that the Ceylonese monarchy was able to re-establish itself in Rājaraṭṭha, a region which was not drastically depopulated and utterly abandoned by the royal court until after the disastrous wars of the thirteenth century, clearly indicates that the impact of the Chola occupation upon the rural scene was far less cataclysmic than its effect upon Anurādhapura.

Merchants and Mercenaries

At this point we must pause to consider another factor—beyond the desire for plunder—which is sometimes adduced to explain the Chola presence in Ceylon and, more briefly, in Southeast Asia. Because Ceylon had for many centuries occupied a key position in the great Arabia-to-China trade arc, it has been inferred that the Cholas wished to gain complete control over that maritime trade for themselves.[32] The difficulty with this commercial thesis is that there is no evidence to indicate that the Chola court ever engaged directly in either domestic or maritime commerce, which was—above the level of mere petty trade—largely in the hands of well-organized alliances of merchant and artisan groups. Indeed, the trade-monopoly thesis raises a number of troublesome questions about the relationship between kings and merchants—questions about the structure of India's external trade to which the advocates of the trade-control thesis have not addressed themselves. In any case, it would be wholly implausible to suggest that the court intended to directly assume the burden of carrying on foreign trade at the expense of both foreign and indigenous merchant groups.

But what about the possibility that the court, though itself not directly involved in commerce, may have acted to protect or advance the interests of Indian merchants? Some scholars have suggested that, like the European chartered companies of a later age, the Indian merchant "corporations" involved their home governments, willingly or otherwise, in imperial adventures abroad.[33] This is an interesting thesis, but we should be careful to avoid reading history backwards by invoking inappropriate analogies with modern colonialism. In order to understand the peculiarities of the Indian situation, we must examine the pattern of Indian long-distance commerce more closely, for—quite apart from the contrasting economic contexts within which medieval Indian and early-modern European commerce flourished—the ambiguous relationship between Indian merchants and major south Indian dynastic powers, prior to about the fourteenth century, must be taken into account.

The Chola period witnessed the flourishing of complex, interlocking networks of regional and long-distance trade. The merchant alliances that dominated it exercised a wide variety of mercantile skills, including a talent for "urban" self-government in certain marketing centers, a habit of maintaining armed troops to protect their caravans

[32] K. A. Nilakanta Sastri in *History of Ceylon*, ed. by H. C. Ray et al. (Colombo, 1959), p. 349; also A. L. Basham, "The Background to the Rise of Parākkamabāhu I," *Ceylon Historical Journal*, IV, 1–4 (1954–55), p. 15.

[33] See especially K. Indrapala, "South Indian Mercantile Communities in Ceylon, circa 950–1250," *Ceylon Journal of Historical and Social Studies*, n.s. I, 2 (July–Dec 1971), pp. 101–13. Certain problems of terminology arise in discussing these communities. K. Indrapala has cogently argued that the conventional use of terms such as "corporation" or "guild" in this context is inappropriate, since these terms carry implications about corporate organization that cannot be sustained by the evidence. "It seems more appropriate to call [the Aiññuṟṟuvar] a community of merchants with common origins, interests and beliefs."; quotation from p. 29 of his "Some Medieval Mercantile Communities of South India and Ceylon," *Journal of Tamil Studies*, II, 2 (Oct 1970), pp. 25–39.

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and settlements, and—for some of them—a willingness to travel across the seas in pursuit of trade. The functioning of such networks, which necessarily cut across many imperial and chiefly domains, depended upon the widespread acceptance of the political neutrality of trade; it is for this reason that kings commonly confined their roles in this commerce to taxation and regulation, and frequently issued charters guaranteeing certain rights and privileges to specified trade-centers—in effect spelling out the terms of those centers' neutrality. Far from being the "creatures" of any particular dynastic regime, the merchant groups exercised a chameleon-like ability to adapt themselves to local regimes to suit their own convenience. In a loosely integrated political system like the Chola dynastic state, it was inevitable that merchant-artisan alliances, like other communities and institutions, should have existed in balanced but cautious cooperation with the royal court. It was not until the subsequent Vijayanagar period, with its intensified mobilization of warrior power, that the prerogatives of merchant alliances were systematically curbed.[34]

However, the neutrality of commerce in the Chola period had its limitations; both the information and the resources which merchant groups had at their disposal were of potential utility to royal courts. Mercantile regiments were sometimes used to supplement royal armies (the best-documented evidence of this, discussed below, is from Ceylon after the Chola occupation) and were thereupon required to undertake rigorous oaths of allegiance to ensure their loyalty—which, like that of other mercenary groups, was not wholly reliable. A more general form of assistance consisted of information—what we would today call "intelligence"—about distant lands, ports, courts, and wealth. Thus, according to the Ceylon Chronicle, Rājarāja's invasion of the island was precipitated by news brought by a horse-trader. Whether this statement is literally true or not is irrelevant; what is important is that the authors of the Chronicle regarded it as reasonable for the Chola court to obtain such information from merchants.

Chola kings appear to have encouraged maritime commerce through ports they controlled, no doubt in expectation of collecting additional port duties. But it was scarcely necessary to exclude foreign merchants from this trade in order to enjoy such profits. Far from securing a trade monopoly for Indian merchants, Chola kings welcomed foreign ones. We know from the Leiden Grant that Rājarāja I (the very Śaivite king whose troops were plundering Buddhist institutions in Ceylon) not only allowed King Mārāvijayōttuṅgavarman of Śrīvijaya to construct a Buddhist *vihāra* in the Chola port of Nāgapaṭṭinam, but also granted the revenues of a village to its maintenance.[35] This project must have been undertaken largely for the convenience of non-Indian merchants, although it should be noted that the Indian merchant class, while predominantly Hindu, also included heterodox elements, reflecting the eclecticism of the market-place.

What of the evidence from Ceylon? Here we see that Indian merchants did extend their commercial—and related military—activities across northern Ceylon in the wake of the Chola incursions of the late tenth and the eleventh centuries, although some commercial encroachment appears to have taken place even earlier.[36] Up to the eve of the

[34] Burton Stein, "Coromandel Trade in Medieval India," in *Merchants and Scholars: Essays in the History of Exploration and Trade*, ed. by John Parker (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minn. Press, 1965), pp. 49–62.

[35] It is equally significant that Rājēndra I respected this grant sufficiently to have it inscribed on copper-plates during his own reign, after his father's demise. For details, see "The Larger Leiden Plates (of Rajaraja I)," *Epigraphia Indica*, XXII (1933–34), pp. 213–66.

[36] See K. R. Venkatarama Ayyar, "Medieval Trade, Craft and Merchant Guilds in South India," *Journal of Indian History*, XXV, 3 (Dec 1947), pp

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Chola invasion under Rājarāja, Ceylon's *internal* trade, at least, had been largely in the hands of Sinhalese merchants, particularly the *vaṇigrāmayan* associations, which in both name and function were similar to the Tamil *maṇigrāmam* merchants. They dominated certain market towns and were granted by the kings of Ceylon special charters, which authorized weight standardization and guaranteed freedom from unauthorized confiscations, taxes, searches, and punishments. But in spite of these (perhaps imitative) parallels with Indian merchant groups, there is evidence of some hostility toward Tamils on the part of the Sinhalese merchants. The remarkable Badulla record, which specifies various rights and privileges guaranteed to that north Ceylon market town in the mid-tenth century, observes that "if a lord who has accepted favors of the Tamils were to arrive in this settlement, he shall not be permitted to enter."[37] The precise implication of this statement, whether political or commercial, is not entirely clear, but since the record dates from a period prior to the invasion of Rājarāja I, this statement cannot refer to Sinhalese nobles cooperating with Rājarāja's forces. Professor Paranavitana has interpreted the statement politically, suggesting that it refers to the brief incursion of Parāntaka I.[38] Whatever the import, the remark implies a genuine fear of the Tamils based upon some perceived military and/or commercial threat.

Other epigraphical evidence suggests that Indian merchant alliances such as the Aiññuṟṟuvar, Vaḷanjīyar, and Nagarattār did subsequently displace the Sinhalese groups, at least along the principal trading routes of northern Ceylon, during the period of Chola dominance. The Chola occupation unquestionably created favorable conditions for these gains, but it would be rash to conclude that the invasion was undertaken specifically to assist merchants in that fashion. Moreover, the Aiññuṟṟuvar were extending their commerce overseas as far as Sumatra without any sustained imperial activities to serve their interests.[39]

The most significant aspect of Indian merchant involvement in medieval Ceylon, but the one that is the most difficult to assess, is military. It has been suggested that the Chola army, like the army serving the kings of Ceylon, relied heavily upon mercenary participation, and that some of these mercenaries were provided by Indian merchant groups. Whatever the merits of this argument, it should be apparent that this form of support for Chola military expansion could be viewed as a "commercial impulse" to empire only in a very narrow sense. It would have had no necessary connection with any commercial-monopoly strategy, since the primary aim would have been to obtain a share in the profits of plunder, the same motive that prompted Chola feudatories to participate.

But did merchant-affiliated troops really join the Chola army in Ceylon? The highly generalized claims of Chola inscriptions do not help us much on this point; the evidence is indirect. We do know that after the expulsion of the Cholas, bodies of Tamil mercenaries calling themselves Vēḷaikkārar troops and identifying themselves as servants of the Aiññuṟṟuvar, Vaḷanjīyar, or Nānādeśi merchants, were employed by kings of Ceylon. Furthermore, these troops, according to their own statements, were drawn from both the "right" (*valaṅgai*) and "left" (*iḍaṅgai*) blocs of non-Brahman castes in

269–80); and K. Indrapala, "Some Medieval Mercantile Communities" (n. 33 above).

[37] *Epigraphia Zeylanica*, III, 4 (1929) and V, 16 (1963); the quote is taken from the latter, which is a revised reading.

[38] *Ibid.*

[39] The Loboe Toewa inscription bears a Śaka date corresponding to 1088, some 63 years after Rājēndra's brief naval raid against Śrīvijaya. K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, "A Tamil Merchant-Guild in Sumatra," *Tijdschrift voor Indische Taal-, Land-, en Volkenkunde*, 1932, pp. 2–15.

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southern India.[40] Remarkably, Vijayabāhu I used them to guard the Temple of the Tooth Relic in Polonnaruva.[41] But the Chronicle also testifies that the Indian mercenaries employed by Vijayabāhu balked at being asked to serve on expeditions to India, and were forcibly subdued—with some difficulty—by Sinhalese troops.[42] Parakkamabāhu I, who ruled in the last half of the twelfth century, also made extensive use of Indian troops. The inference has been made that this practice was adopted in imitation of the Cholas. But the evidence is not conclusive. It is certainly true that the Cholas commonly employed many so-called Veḷaikkāra regiments, but it is a mistake to assume that all Veḷaikkāra troops in Chola service were provided by merchant associations, for such was not the case.

All that we can reasonably say is that Indian merchant alliances did vastly expand their commercial activities in northern Ceylon in the wake of the Chola incursions, and that they brought their troops with them—certainly to protect their commerce, but possibly also to serve with the Chola imperial forces on an ad hoc basis. After the expulsion of the Cholas (around 1070), the kings of Ceylon did employ such mercantile troops; however, as with the earlier Indian mercenaries, the results were mixed. In any case, as K. Indrapala has noted, the earlier references to Indian mercenaries in the Chronicle suggest that their employers in Ceylon, whether kings or rebels, had to send to India for them, whereas from the time of Vijayabāhu I, when the term Veḷaikkāra begins to appear in the inscriptions of Ceylon, there are no further references to sending abroad for mercenaries, implying that Indian mercenaries could now be obtained locally.[43]

Consolidation and Erosion

The initial season of plunder had been followed by a partial consolidation of Chola power in Rājaraṭṭha. Śaivite temples were constructed in Polonnaruva and in the emporium of Mahātiṭṭha, projects which reflect an intention to transform Chola encampments into more permanent military enclaves.[44] There was some effort to institute taxation, especially on merchants and artisans, but our slender epigraphical evidence relates solely to urban tolls—imposed upon traders plying main highways, and upon spinners and weavers in towns.[45] Of rural taxation or tribute we have no details, but the fact that such levies were demanded and probably paid, at least in part, during the years when the Cholas were strong in the north, may be inferred from the Chronicle's testimony that when the Cholas were in disarray, during the third quarter of the century, the people of Rājaraṭṭha were no longer willing to pay.[46]

Under Rājēndra Chola I, perhaps the most aggressive king of his line, Chola raids were launched southward from Rājaraṭṭha into Rohaṇa. By his fifth year, Rājēndra claimed to have completely conquered Ceylon, a claim that has led some historians to assert that Rājēndra "completed" the conquest Rājarāja had begun. But the Cholas never really consolidated their control over southern Ceylon, which in any case lacked large and

[40] *Epigraphia Indica*, XVIII (1926), No. 38.

[41] S. Paranavitana, "Polonnaruva Inscription of Vijayabahu I," *Epigraphia Indica*, XVIII, 1 (1926), pp. 330–38.

[42] *Cv.* 60.35ff.

[43] Indrapala, "South Indian Mercantile Communities" (n. 33 above), p. 112.

[44] Archaeological Survey of Ceylon, *Report* for 1906, pp. 17ff; Arch. Survey of India, *South Indian Inscriptions*, IV (1923), Nos. 594–96, 598.

[45] Wijetunga (n. 2 above), p. 74; *South Indian Inscriptions*, IV (1923), No. 1412.

[46] *Cv.* 58.11ff.

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prosperous settlements to tempt long-term Chola occupation. Thus, under Rājēndra, Chola predatory expansion in Ceylon began to reach a point of diminishing returns.

Ironically, the Chola settlements in the north in turn became targets of attack and plunder, partly because the Sinhalese "enemy"—remnants of the royal court and some chiefs who supported it—were now more dispersed and capable of organizing guerrilla resistance. Since members of the royal house of Ceylon were natural rallying-points for counterattacks, the Cholas were anxious to seize them. The *Cūlavaṃsa* admits that Rājēndra's forces captured King Mahinda and transported him to India, where he eventually died in exile.[47] But Prince Kassapa, son of Mahinda, hid in Rohaṇa, where Chola forces vainly searched for him. Kassapa assumed the title of Vikkamabāhu I and "ruled" in Rohaṇa for several years (c. 1029–1041)[48] while attempting to organize a campaign of liberation and unification. But Vikkamabāhu died before he could consolidate his power, and a series of ephemeral aspirants to the throne subsequently appeared and disappeared in Rohaṇa without dislodging the Cholas from the north.

Some time in the middle of the eleventh century there arose in Rohaṇa an ambitious Sinhalese prince named Kitti, the future Vijayabāhu I (1059–1114). He was descended, or at least claimed to be descended, from the royal house of Ceylon.[49] By the age of seventeen, he had defeated his most powerful rivals in Rohaṇa and was anxious to take on the Cholas. Once again, the Cholas faced the task of dealing with an aggressive but elusive foe. In attempting to subjugate southern Ceylon from strongholds in the north, the Cholas had to contend with the same problem that had already proven so frustrating to Sinhalese kings, i.e., trying to control a country of scattered, turbulent chiefs and intractable rebels whose allegiance, if any, was at best opportunistic. But Vijayabāhu, from his base in Rohaṇa, faced a similar difficulty; he had to contend with the hostility of local chiefs who regarded him as a greater threat to their independence than the Cholas were.[50] For that reason, the Cholas occasionally succeeded in recruiting nominal support from rebel chiefs in Rohaṇa, so that Vijayabāhu had difficulty consolidating a firm territorial base from which to launch a decisive campaign against the Tamils. On the other hand, the Cholas were unable to eliminate similar opposition to themselves in the north. Gradually the north-south conflict developed into a prolonged, see-saw struggle of raids and counter-raids, with the forces of Vijayabāhu advancing upon Polonnaruva and then falling back to fortresses in Dakkhiṇadeśa and Rohaṇa to withstand retaliatory Chola attacks and sieges.

But time was on the side of the insurgent forces, and gradually Chola determination began to falter. Even without a unified "national" force behind him, Vijayabāhu possessed strategic advantages, and a prolonged war of attrition was of greater benefit to him than to the Cholas. After the accession of Vīrarājēndra (1063–69) to the Chola throne, the Cholas were increasingly on the defensive, not only in Ceylon, but also in peninsular India, where they were hard-pressed by the attacks of the Cāḷukyas from the Deccan. When Vijayabāhu finally established a firm base in southern Ceylon, he launched a successful, two-pronged attack upon Anurādhapura and Polonnaruva. Anurādhapura fell quickly; Polonnaruva was captured after a prolonged siege of the isolated

[47] *Cv.* 55.19ff.

[48] I have adopted Geiger's dates here, although again it should be noted that the Chronicle's attribution of twelve years may not be factual. (See n. 23 above.)

[49] His military success no doubt served as verification of appropriate ancestral credentials; his genealogy is credulously recited in the Chronicle.

[50] *Cv.* 58.16–17

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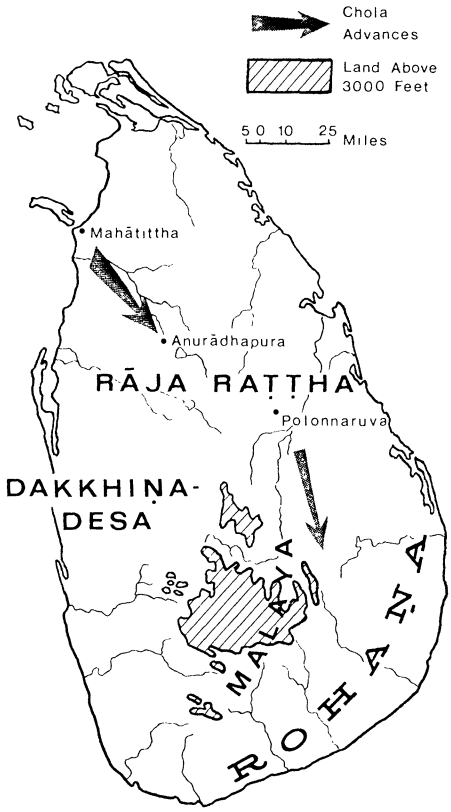

Eleventh Century Ceylon

Chola forces. In order to stave off total defeat, Vīrarājēndra was forced to dispatch an expedition from the mainland to recapture the settlements in northern Ceylon and carry the attack back into Rohaṇa. What had begun as a profitable incursion and occupation was now deteriorating into desperate attempts to retain a foothold in the north.

Although it would be more dramatic to picture Vijayabāhu finally driving the Cholas into the sea, the occupation actually ended in Chola withdrawal after a further series of indecisive clashes. If the flood-tide of Chola expansion had been sustained by vigorous royal leadership at home and political disorganization among the Cholas' dynastic rivals, the ebb-tide was occasioned by the reverse, namely disturbances at home accompanied by the challenges of skillful leaders in the enemy camp. Thus, when the Cāḷukya-Chola prince Kulōttuṅga I came to the Chola throne in 1070, after a period of political crisis at the Chola court, he initially concentrated on consolidating his authority in India. The Ceylon adventure, which had been associated with his three immediate predecessors (Rājādhirāja, Rājēndra II, and Vīrarājēndra—all sons of Rājēndra I), no longer seemed to be worthwhile. Kulōttuṅga had less personal prestige involved in the Ceylon project, so he simply terminated it with little attempt to recoup Chola losses.

The Cholas had forestalled raids against the mainland during the occupation, but Ceylonese harassment resumed in the last quarter of the eleventh century, following Chola withdrawal from the island. The Pāṇḍyan country had never been fully subdued

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by the Cholas, and renewed Sinhalese interference in Pāṇḍyan politics further eroded the Chola hold upon Pāṇḍyamaṇḍalam.[51] Although Kulōttuṅga I was an aggressive monarch, he was preoccupied with affairs in the north, particularly in Vengi, where he had previously reigned as the Eastern Cāḷukya prince Rājēndra II. Indeed, he felt it necessary to direct preemptive military attacks against Kalinga (Orissa), far to the north, in order to prevent Kalingan invasions of Vengi, just as earlier Chola kings had been drawn into Ceylon partly in order to secure control of the Pāṇḍyan country—in both cases, with little ultimate success.[52]

We see, then, that the dynamism and direction of Chola imperial expansion was dependent upon the subtle interplay of internal and external factors. Among the internal or "push" factors, the compulsion to seek new sources of portable wealth was of primary importance. Closely related was the need to provide an integrative activity that would mobilize the military capacities of subordinate chiefs and keep them occupied with profitable expeditions. Therefore, a lack of fully coercive royal power over those chiefs was not an obstacle to military expansion—indeed, it was one of the reasons for that expansion—as long as vigorous royal leadership was available to provide an organizing authority and sustain momentum. That momentum was sustained well into the reign of Rājēndra I, for the initial Chola successes in Ceylon were followed—perhaps as a natural corollary—by the even more ambitious naval raid against Śrīvijaya in 1025. That expedition into Southeast Asia constituted the high-water mark of Chola expansion, and was the ultimate expression of its predatory aspect.

External or "pull" factors were both economic and strategic. Prospects of plunder and the source of enemy threats largely determined the directions of Chola expansion. Long-distance raiding was not merely profitable; it also provided—if only momentarily—some measure of protection to the Chola heartland by forcing rival kings into a defensive posture. But where, as in northern Ceylon, rapid exhaustion of the richest sources of plunder led to an attempt to establish a forward military base and to institute a rudimentary tribute/tax system there while undertaking occasional forays into more distant territories, the Cholas ran the risk of increasing their own vulnerability and ultimately expending more resources than they gained. Thus, the years 985–1070 marked a broad period of cyclic expansion and contraction of south Indian power, with Ceylon becoming a major attraction and then a major commitment. The subsequent period, beginning with Kulōttuṅga I's accession in 1070, saw Ceylon fade from Chola consciousness as a major source of profit, but not as a source of trouble. While the major Chola military efforts now took a new direction, the problems inherent in south Indian dynastic politics remained the same.

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[51] For a radically different interpretation of these conflicts, and indeed the entire period covered by this article, see Senarat Paranavitana, *Ceylon and Malaysia* (Colombo: Lake House Investments, 1966). The stimulating but problematic hypotheses advanced in that work raise a number of technical questions that cannot be addressed in the short space of an article. I have therefore confined my present remarks to the exposition of an alternative model.

[52] K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, *The Cōḷas*, 2nd ed. (Madras: Univ. of Madras, 1955), p. 321.

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